ADDRESS:

Announcement of
Icelandic Language Department
in the University of Manitoba

By

Dr. A. H. S. GILLSON,
President, The University of Manitoba

(Foreword by P. H. T. Thorlakson, M.D.)

Playhouse Theatre
Winnipeg, Manitoba
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The Department of Icelandic Language and Literature The University of Manitoba

By Dr. P. H. T. Thorlakson
Chairman of the Foundation Committee

Most of us here this evening are Canadians of Icelandic descent. In this large audience are many Canadians of other origins. The exact origin of people and their language is for the most part lost in antiquity. However, on good authority we know that Europe was invaded about 7000 years ago by a people who came up from the North-west of India.

Philologists tell us that from the language spoken by this primitive people developed the Indo-European group of languages which form the basis of all the modern languages of Europe except four, namely, Finnish, Hungarian, Turkish and Basque. A dictionary of 2200 root words has been compiled from these ancient languages. Old Greek preserved 67 per cent of the Indo-European root words, Latin 40 percent, whereas Icelandic, that ancient and classic language still spoken by the people of Iceland, has preserved over 57 per cent.

Iceland, that little island in the North Atlantic, was largely colonized by people from Norway, many of whom had lived for years in the northern parts of the British Isles. The Icelandic people therefore are of Norse, Irish and Scottish ancestry.

Flest af okkur sem hér erum samankomin í kvöld, eru canadískir þegnar af íslenzkum stofni. Í þessum mikla mannfjölda eru og margir af annara þjóða uppruna. Nákvæm þekking um uppruna þjóðanna og tungur þeirra, er að mestu týnd í hulduheimum fornaldanna; þó vitum við eftir ábyggilegum heimildum, að fyrir 7000 árum áttu sér stað miklir þjóðflutningar frá norðvestur hluta Indlands til Evrópu.

Tungumálafræðingar skýra okkur frá, að tungumál þessarar frumþjóðar liggi til grundvallar öllum tungumálum Evrópu nema fjögurra, það er finnsku, ungversku, tyrknesku og basque tungu. Þeir hafa safnað 2200 rótum orða þessara frumtungu. Forngríska hefir varðveitt 67% af þessum indogermönsku frumrótum, latínan 40%, en íslenzkan, þessi forna klassiska tunga, sem enn er töluð af íslenzku þjóðinni, hefir varðveitt yfir 57%.

Ísland, þessi litla eyja í Norður-Atlantshafi, var byggð að mestu leyti af fólki frá Noregi. Margt af því hafði dvalið svo áratugum skipti í norðurhluta Bretlandseyja; íslenzka þjóðin er því af norskum, írskum og skoskum uppruna.

These colonists of 874 A.D. took with them to Iceland the language commonly spoken at that time in Northern Europe and in over fifty per cent of England. This old basic and classic language with its famous Sagas and Eddic poems has been faithfully preserved through the centuries by the people of Iceland.

Another noteworthy contribution by the people of this small nation was in the founding of a representative form of government and in the making of laws for the protection of the rights of the individual. When in 1930 the Icelandic nation was celebrating the 1000th anniversary of its parliament, Lord Stanley of Great Britain acknowledged this contribution. He said that he had come to represent the Mother of Parliaments and also to salute and pay tribute to the Grandmother of Parliaments.

In September 1936 the late Lord Tweedsmuir, then Governor-General of Canada spoke to a group of citizens in the town of Gimli who were descendants of the people of old Iceland. To them he said: "You have become good Canadians, and have shared in the enterprises and struggles of this new nation, and at the same time I rejoice to think that you have never forgotten the traditions of your homeland." He went on to say that a strong people is made not only by accepting willingly the duties and loyalties of their adopted country, but also by bringing their own native tra-

Þessir frumherjar er hófu landnám á Íslandi 874, fluttu með sér þangað tungumál, er þá var almennt talað á Norðurlöndum og á hálfu Bretlandi. Þessi forna, klassiska stofntunga, er geymir Íslendingasögurnar og Eddurnar, var dyggilega varðveitt af íslenzku þjóðinni í gegnum aldirnar.

Annað mikilvægt menningarafrek þessarar fámennu þjóðar var stofnun þjóðþings og sköpun löggjafar til öryggis rétti einstaklingsins.

Árið 1930, þegar íslenzka þjóðin hélt hátíðlegt þúsund ára afmæli Alþingis, viðurkenndi Stanley lávarður frá Bretlandi opinberlega þetta mikla menningartillag. Hann sagðist vera þangað kominn sem fulltrúi frá móður þjóðþingsins til að flytja ömmu þjóðþingsins kveðjur og votta henni virðingu.

Í september 1936 heimsótti Tweedsmuir lávarður, þáverandi landsstjóri Canada bæinn Gimli, og flutti þar ræðu fyrir hópi af afkomendum þjóðarinnannar á gamla Íslandi. Hann lét þá svo ummælt: — „Þér hafið reynzt góðir canadískir borgarar og hafið tekið ykkar þátt í framsókn og baráttu þessarar ungu þjóðar; ég fagna því og, að þér hafið aldrei gleymt menningararfi yðar". Hann bætti því og við, að mikilhæf þjóð skapaðist ekki einungis með því að fólkið tæki að sér skyldur og hollustu við kjörlandið, heldur einnig af þeirri ástæðu, að það leggði þjóðlífinu til sinn eigin

ditions as a contribution to the making of Canada.

It is the hope of the Founders that the establishment of the Chair in Icelandic Language and Literature at the University of Manitoba will make a contribution to the cultural and educational life of Canada. This department of the University will teach an ancient basic language with its wealth of classic and modern literature, will strengthen the department of English because Icelandic is basic to the Anglo-Saxon portion of the English language, and will provide a stimulus to research in comparative philology.

And now, on behalf of the Founders whose contributions have made the establishment of this new department in the University a reality, I wish to thank the President of the University and the members of the Board of Governors for their interest and encouragement.

I also wish to thank our visiting artists, Maria Markan and Helga Sigurdson who have come from New York to provide us with this evening of good music. No better setting could have been provided for the announcement to be made by Dr. A. H. S. Gillson, President of The University of Manitoba.

menningararf Canada til uppbyggingar.

Sú er ósk og von stofnendanna að kennslustólsdeildinni í íslenzku og íslenzkum fræðum við Manitobaháskólann, að hún megi leggja fram skerf til menntunar- og menningarlífs canadísku þjóðarinnar. Þessi deild við háskólann mun kenna forna stofntungu, sem er auðug af sígildum og nýjum bókmentum, og mun hún styrkja ensku deildina vegna þess, að íslenzkan er grunntunga að hinum engilsaxneska hluta enskrar tungu og mun vekja áhuga fyrir rannsóknum í samanburðar málfræði.

Í lok ræðu sinnar las Dr. Thorlakson upp bréf frá Thor Thors sendiherra, forsætisraðherra Íslands, Þjóðræknisfélagi Íslands og The League of Norsmen í Canada, er tekið var með miklum fögnuði.

Announcement of Icelandic Language Department

Text of an Address given by Dr. A. H. S. Gillson, President of the University of Manitoba, at the Playhouse Theatre, Winnipeg, Manitoba, on the night of Friday, March 30, 1951, *announcing the establishment of a Chair of Icelandic Language and Literature in the University of Manitoba in the session* 1951-52.

It is not often in the short span of a single life that one has the opportunity of being connected with an event of heroic dimensions. Generally our celebrations are connected with events long since passed, but this gathering here tonight on March 30, 1951, is one of those rare occurrences which itself will often be celebrated and remembered in the years ahead.

Soon after I came to this Province to live I was taken by Judge Lindal to Gimli. I shall never forget the emotions which filled me there. We had an evening meal with an elderly man (whose name I am sure many of you would know), of course an Icelander and a Canadian. A pioneer. His conversation was filled with living references and cross references to the heroic figures in the distant history of Iceland and to the migrations of this noble people. The men and women of the Sagas were to him as real as those of the current newspaper page. He was saturated with the example of those distant heroes. They were to him an inspiration for contemporary living, an ideal of human greatness. Judge Lindal took this as a matter of course, but to me it was a great experience.

As an undergraduate I had, through the translations of William Morris and others, come under the spell of the literature of the Sagas, the literature which the late Lord Tweedsmuir has called "the noblest literature ever produced by mortal man", and to which on the occasion of his visit to Gimli in 1936 he referred again as "among the chief works of human genius". Since my first visit to Gimli I have experienced the same thing in other parts of Manitoba, but repetition does not dim the vividness of the experience of finding in Manitoba the ancient Icelandic culture, vigorous and alive, a dynamic element in contemporary life.

As an aside may I say that it interests me greatly to remember that although it is not known who constructed more than one or two of the forty Sagas that have been preserved in Iceland, the name of one of the first men to collect the Sagas was "a man wise and of good memory, and a speaker of the truth" who lived at the same time as Wil-

liam the Conqueror, and whose name was Ari Thorgilsson.

Of course, the reason for the vigour of this ancient culture here in Manitoba is that we are fortunate to be still close in time to those heroic days of the coming of the first Icelandic settlers to Winnipeg. You will remember that it was only 75 years ago last October that New Iceland was founded. So close is it that many of you know and have known members of the original pioneers. I hope that Dr. Thorlakson (to whom we all owe such a vast debt) will allow me to remind you that his father, The Reverend N. S. Thorlakson, was one of those pioneers, and was for 27 years pastor of the Icelandic Lutheran Congregation of Selkirk.

It is clear, however, that as time passes this grandeur and living force would tend to slowly disappear on the North American continent, and even in this Province, in spite of the fact that in this city there live more Icelanders than in any other city of the world, with the exception of the Capital of Iceland itself. It is fundamental that something shall be done to preserve this great heritage not only for Canadians of Icelandic origin but for all Canadians.

Tonight we are meeting here to set in motion that final act which will establish for all time this ancient culture of Iceland as a living force in the development of our beloved country, Canada. You all know that I am referring to the establishment of the Chair of Icelandic Language and Literature in the University of Manitoba.

This project has received the warmest commendations of many eminent men of non-Icelandic origin. I am going to read some of these to you.

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University of Toronto
Toronto 5, Ontario,
February 15, 1949.

P. H. T. Thorlakson, Esq., M.D.,
St. Mary's and Vaughan Streets,
Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Dear Dr. Thorlakson:

Mixed feeling arose in me when I heard the good news that sufficient funds have been collected to establish in The University of Manitoba a Chair in Icelandic Language and Literature. It was with nostalgia that I recalled the gift to the University in 1935 from Mr. A. B. Olson of his unique collection of Icelandic books, the bequest in 1937 of Mr. Magnus Henrikson of Churchbridge, Saskatchewan, the decision of the Government of Iceland to make the University Library a depository of copies of all books printed after 1939 in Iceland, and the discussions about and plans for an Icelandic Chair with colleagues within and friends outside the University, some of whom have passed to the Great Beyond.

It was with satisfaction, yea, with happiness, that I learned that the plans are about fulfilled: It is fitting, for obvious geographical and ethnical reasons, that The University of Manitoba should have a strong department of Icelandic Studies. Other Canadian universities will recognize that primacy and send to The University of Manitoba students who desire to share the wealth of Icelandic culture. The Chair will enable The University of Manitoba to conduct research in comparative philology that will redound to the benefit of Canadian scholarship.

Moreover, the new Chair in the University of Manitoba will enhance the contribution that Canadians of Icelandic stock have made and are making to the development of our country. That high contribution has already been out of all proportion to the number of those Canadians.

In creating a colourful, rational mosaic that will be distinctively Canadian, we must draw on the rich social, cultural and spiritual traditions of many racial stocks. The traditions from Iceland are second to none.

From a sense of deep personal interest, and from an official understanding of what the Chair will mean not only to The University of Manitoba but to the whole of Canada, I congratulate you and your associates on your success.

Yours faithfully,
"Sidney Smith"
President.

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Diocesan Church House,
George Street, Sydney.
January 28, 1949.

Dear Dr. Thorlakson:

I am very glad to hear that a chair of Icelandic Language and Literature is about to be established in the University of Manitoba.

The great literature of Iceland, which is far and away the greatest legacy which has been left to us by the Northern Nations, has never received the attention in the English-speaking world of which it is worthy. Since old Icelandic was spoken over half England in the days of King Canute, we might be accused of a certain lack of appreciation of our own ancestors. Few members of the English-speaking peoples at the present day are aware that a not inconsiderable part of the stream of the original Icelandic colonists came from the British Isles. If to this fact is joined the value of the old literature for its own sake, as source material for an understanding of the Norse mythology, as containing the story of the earliest discoverers of the North American Continent, together with such masterpieces as the leading Sagas, we discover yet more convincing reasons for congratulation at the establishment of a chair in Icelandic.

I therefore congratulate you on this new advance, and hope that there will be an abundant enrolment of students to enjoy the advantages of initiation into the fascinating world of Iceland.

With all good wishes,
Yours sincerely,
"C. VENN PILCHER"
Bishop Coadjutor of Sydney

The Johns Hopkins University
Baltimore, Maryland
January 27, 1949.

Dr. P. H. T. Thorlakson,
St. Mary's and Vaughan St.,
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada.

Dear Dr. Thorlakson:

It is good to hear that a chair of Icelandic is to be established in the University of Manitoba. Such a chair has long been badly needed, and the University of Manitoba is obviously the place for it, as that province is, and doubtless always will be, the cultural center for people of Icelandic descent in North America. As you know, Icelandic studies are actively pursued in a number of universities of the United States, but there is no specifically Icelandic chair anywhere in this country, so far as I know. The closest approach to it is the chair of Scandinavian Philology in this university, held by Dr. Stefan Einarsson, whose work has always been primarily in the Icelandic field. Professor Richard Beck is also a leading scholar in this field, but his teaching duties, if I am not mistaken cover a much wider area, and he is unable to devote himself exclusively or even predominantly to Icelandic studies. There ought to be a chair which would enable an Icelandic specialist to concentrate on his specialty, and I am delighted to learn that the University of Manitoba is to set up such a chair.

As a Professor of English, I can bear witness to the importance of Icelandic studies for workers in the English field. My own scholarly career would have been impossible without the knowledge of Icelandic which I was able to obtain by a year's residence in Iceland. The literature of Old and Middle English cannot be studied with full success without some acquaintance with Icelandic literature, and a knowledge of the Icelandic language is indispensable to every successful student of the history of the English language. In other words, the new chair at the University of Manitoba will be an asset of the first importance to the English department, in addition to the importance it will have in its own right.

I extend to you, and to the University, my heartiest congratulations

on the occasion of the establishment of the new chair of Icelandic. In behalf of the many American admirers of Icelandic culture, I wish you well in this significant undertaking. May the new chair find a worthy holder and live up to the promise of its founding.

Sincerely yours,

"Kemp Malone"

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Ridgehurst
Christmas Common
Watlington, Oxon., England.

2, March, 1949.

Dear Dr. Thorlakson:

I am very much obliged to you for sending me a copy of your report on the progress already made towards founding a chair of Icelandic studies in the University of Manitoba, and copies of the letters relating to this. With everything in these I am in complete agreement, for in my opinion there is no country or place outside of Iceland where a university chair of Icelandic could more appropriately be founded. Any student who has to learn the language before he can understand and appreciate Icelandic literature (which would usually be his objective) will have facilities for doing so there which are not to be found elsewhere except in Reykjavik. The large Icelandic community of Winnipeg and its neighborhood, with its keen interest in the preservation and use of its mother tongue, will provide ample opportunity for acquiring a knowledge of the language in its present form, and thereby obtaining a wider and sounder knowledge of it than by purely academic study of the older tongue. This is important not merely for understanding the history of the language, and recognizing its essential unity throughout the centuries, but for a thorough understanding of the older literature and ability to read easily so much that Icelandic scholars have written about it in their own tongue. In this respect the student at the University of Manitoba could have a great advantage over those in other countries who study Old Icelandic in the same way as they do Anglo-Saxon.

The University would also naturally become a centre for students of Icelandic origin, from the Winnipeg Area and other parts of Canada, who wished to specialize in the study of their own language and literature. There is still much work to be done in this field, especially in the period between 1400 and 1800, and it would be all to the good if part of this were done outside of Iceland and so made more readily accessible to the great body of scholars and general readers in the English speaking countries and elsewhere. It may also be regarded as certain that such work would result in closer relations between the Universities of Manitoba and Reykjavik to the mutual advantage of both in furthering the progress of Northern studies.

Trusting that you will soon be able to report the actual establishment of the Chair, I remain,

Yours sincerely,

"William A. Craigie"

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This project has been a tremendous undertaking, for while it is true that the largest Icelandic group in the world outside Iceland is in Manitoba the size of that group is very small being only about 15,000 strong, with possibly another 10,000 scattered throughout Canada and the United States of America.

Yet, this group in Manitoba, consisting of doctors and fishermen, judges and farmers, merchants and teachers, set itself the objective of raising $200,000 to endow in perpetuity this Chair of Icelandic Language and Literature in the University of Manitoba. Tonight we are gathered together to report that the goal is now in sight.

Without going into too much detail I would like to recall that 26 years ago the Icelandic National League passed a resolution to the effect that the League

commence the raising of a $100,000 fund, the interest to be used for the cost of teaching Icelandic in the centres of learning of the Province. Actually the first donation for this purpose did not take place until 1944, although at a meeting of the Board of Governors of the University of Manitoba held on February 10, 1938, the President of the University, Dr. S. E. Smith, reported that Magnus Hinrikson had bequeathed $2,000 to his executors in trust for the endowment of a chair of Icelandic Language in the University of Manitoba. A special committee was appointed by the Board to consider the matter but nothing was done until March 8, 1944, when a letter was received by the Board of Govenors of the University, from Dr. P. H. T. Thorlakson in which the first actual payment for the purpose of the Chair was made. On December 27, 1947, the late Mr. Justice H. A. Bergman sent his personal donation to the fund to the Comptroller of the University, and in his letter he announced that an active campaign was under way under the chairmanship of Dr. P. H. T. Thorlakson. Five Icelandic organizations sponsored the project, the Icelandic National League, the Icelandic Canadian Club, the Jon Sigurdson Chapter of the I.O.D.E., the two Good-Templar Chapters, and the Icelandic Celebration Committee. The work was carried through under the auspices of the Foundation Committee which consisted of Dr. Thorlakson as Chairman, Miss Margret Petursson, secretary, Mr. A. G. Eggertson, K.C., Consul G. L. Johannson, Judge W. J. Lindal and Dr. L. A. Sigurdson.

Contributions of $1,000 and upwards have come in from Manitoba, Saskatchewan, British Columbia and Ontario and even beyond the borders of Canada, from North Dakota, and several points in the United States. The two largest are from Mr. A. P. Johannson who donated $50,000 and Mr. and Mrs. J. D. Eaton of Toronto who donated $18,000.

This has entailed tremendous and continuous work on the part of members of the campaign committee who have used each other's leisure hours in the weekends and whenever they could get the time to travel, at their own expense, explaining to members of the Icelandic community the ideals behind this great project and asking for substantial aid. Literally nothing has daunted these countrymen of Leifur Erikson, for at this moment there is in deposit in the University of Manitoba the great sum of $155,000, $20,000 more having already been promised of the remaining $45,000 to be obtained.

On February 15, 1949, a Trust Deed was executed by the University of Manitoba in which it was stated:—

"If, on or before June 17th, 1952, the Endowment Fund shall amount to, or be of the value of, not less than $150,000:

(a) The University shall, on or before June 17th, 1952, establish a Chair of Icelandic Language and Literature within the Faculty of Arts and Science of

the University, as a Department of such Faculty, with the object of providing courses of instruction and promoting studies and research in the field of Icelandic Language and Literature.

(b) The University shall on or before June 17th, 1952, create a Professorship of Icelandic Language and Literature, and shall from time to time appoint a suitably qualified specialist in Icelandic Language and Literature, whose duties shall include the conduct and direction of such classes and courses of study in Icelandic Language and Literature as the Senate of the University may from time to time determine.

(c) The University shall maintain the said Department so far as the income of the Endowment Fund shall permit, on a basis comparable in every way with that of other departments in the Humanities established in the University.

(d) The income of the Endowment Fund arising after the establishment of the Chair of Icelandic Language and Literature shall be applied by the University, firstly in payment of the salary of the said Professor of Icelandic Language and Literature, and secondly, so far as the same will thereunto extend and the Board of Governors of the University may in their discretion authorize, in providing such additional teaching assistance as the extent of instruction offered by the said Department may warrant, and such books, materials and library service as may be deemed by the Board of Governors of the University necessary or desirable for the purposes of the said Department.

The university shall provide opportunity to the Professor of Icelandic Language and Literature to engage in extra-mural lecturing and other extension work in Icelandic Language and Literature, to such reasonable extent as may be undertaken without interference with his normal duties, and as may be from time to time authorized by the University. The extension work may include lectures in the Province of Manitoba and elsewhere, as may be from time to time authorized by the University."

On December 2, 1950, the Comptroller of the University reported to me that funds in the hands of the University amounted to $150,153.90, and it was clear that the University was then obligated to establish the Chair.

The announcement that I wish to make tonight is that the University of Manitoba is establishing the Chair of Icelandic Language and Literature in the fall of 1951 for the academic session 1951-52, and that vigorous plans are now going forward to find the first incumbent of that Chair.

This is not going to be an easy task for he must be a scholar, that is clear, but he must also be a man who through writing and lecturing, both in Icelandic and English, both in the University and throughout the Province, will generate great interest in all things Icelandic, not only amongst Canadians of Icelandic descent, but also amongst Canadians of other origins.

Thus we have come almost to the end of one phase but equally are we commencing another. It is the intention of the University to set up an Advisory Committee on Icelandic Studies, the members of this committee to consist not only of men on the teaching staff of the University, but also representative members of the Icelandic community with the President of the University as Chairman. In this way will the University be kept in touch with the thoughts and desires of the Icelandic Canadian community, so that as the Department develops it may fulfil its function completely.

There is one other thing I must mention. The University is at the present time about to build a University library. In that library will be a museum, and it is our strong desire that a collection of objects, antique and modern, will be built up which will preserve for all Canadians those things of beauty and utility which you and your forefathers used. The spiritual value for succeeding generations of such a collection taken in conjunction with the unique Icelandic library of our University, cannot be overestimated.

What is expected from this venture? Certainly undergraduate study of Icelandic Language, Literature and History leading into post-graduate work in English, Icelandic and Germanics generally. This is the very minimum, but this I am sure would not be regarded by any of us as enough. Surely another ideal and aim is that there will be thus established for all time the centre from which all agencies working for the preservation of Icelandic culture on the North American continent will draw life and inspiration. But to me even this is only the means to a further end of much wider spiritual significance.

My hope would be that because of the establishment of this Chair the resulting study of the history and literature of this noble people who through the ages have coupled an intense feeling for individual personal freedom with fearlessness and high courage, there would be a lasting contribution to the moral and spiritual strength of Canadian life.

If this were even partially fulfilled then are we all this night taking part in an event whose grandeur and inner meaning could only be described by the nameless saga-men of long ago.